

Environment Bill – tackling our single use culture

23 September 2021

Overview

There is an urgent need to tackle the environmental harms caused by plastic pollution. Part of the government's response is a new power in the Environment Bill to enable charges to be introduced on single use plastic items. However, its narrow focus limits the possibility of addressing the bigger picture and risks serious unintended consequences.

Resource extraction and processing **causes** 90 per cent of global biodiversity loss and water stress and 50 per cent of overall carbon emissions. Environmental legislation must address these challenges by addressing our careless consumption of natural resources. As a responsible global citizen, the UK needs to move away from a wasteful, throwaway lifestyle to one that values resources, as the government has **recognised**. This requires policies that reduce our reliance on single use items of all materials, not just plastics.

Throughout its parliamentary passage, there has been strong cross party support for strengthening the Environment Bill's provisions on preventing waste and increasing resource efficiency. The House of Lords **passed** amendment 40 during Report stage, to extend the proposed Schedule 9 charging power to all single use items, irrespective of the material from which they are made. This amendment was prioritised by Peers above several others on fly tipping, plastic packaging and the deposit return scheme. **Retaining this welcome amendment would strengthen and future proof the bill, reduce the chance of unintended consequences and be an unequivocal sign of the government's commitment to delivering a more circular economy.**

Tackle the problem, don't shift it

Experience shows that applying charges solely to single use plastic items would encourage a shift to other materials, with unintended environmental consequences.

- **Alternative items often have worse environmental impacts.** A paper bag would need to be reused **43 times** to have a lower impact than the average plastic bag. Most impacts occur before it is ever used in the land needed for forestry, chemical processing and transport. These impacts are less visible than a littered plastic bag, but they are no less important.
- **Their carbon footprint is often higher.** Switching all consumption of plastic packaging in the UK on a like-for-like basis to other common packaging materials could almost triple associated carbon emissions, from 1.7 billion tonnes CO₂e to 4.8 billion tonnes CO₂e.
- **Substitution will intensify pressure on forestry supply chains.** Many common substitutes to single use plastic items are made of paper, card or wood, and the cumulative impact of a large scale switch to these would put pressure on already strained forestry supply chains. This would increase the risk of unsustainable procurement and potentially undermine **measures** elsewhere in the bill to tackle deforestation linked to UK demand for certain forest risk commodities.
- **Retailers say that the focus on plastic is distracting from real progress on sustainability** with material switching not always accompanied by a full environmental assessment. A focus on plastic has distracted from the development of circular solutions (such as refill and reuse) that reduce overall material use.

A [better solution](#) would be to discourage the use of all non-essential single use items, irrespective of material. This would foster business model innovation in support of a less wasteful, more efficient society. It would also help avoid unintended consequences, such as when the regulation aimed at nudging consumers to buy cars with lower carbon dioxide emissions resulted in a shift to diesel vehicles, with harmful impacts on air quality, public health and the economy, due to a failure to consider environmental impacts in the round.

Show leadership and clarity on single use

The government has described the Environment Bill as world leading but, on the issue of tackling our single use culture, its ambitions are not even leading within the UK. The Welsh Government's [circular economy strategy](#) aims to phase out all unnecessary single use items. The Scottish Government is currently developing a Circular Economy Bill with the intention of promoting reuse.

Limiting the scope of the Environment Bill could inhibit the ability of the devolved administrations to implement more ambitious measures to tackle single use beyond plastics, because of the UK Internal Market Act. Retailers and manufacturers would benefit from a coherent message on the UK's direction of travel from single use to reuse.

Without a more holistic charging power, England risks, at best, falling behind its neighbours and, at worst, becoming a barrier to progress in the devolved administrations.

Plug a regulatory gap

Existing powers have limited scope to tackle non-plastic single use items. The [Environmental Protection Act 1990](#) provides a power to ban single use items made from materials deemed harmful to the environment or to human or animal health. This has so far only been used to restrict plastic products, based on their end-of-pipe pollution impacts. It is not clear that it could apply to non-plastic equivalents, which cause significant environmental damage during extraction and production but may break down harmlessly once littered. While the 1990 Act contains a power to ban single use items, this is not the same as a power to levy charges on them.

Unless amendment 40 is retained to broaden the charging power to all single use items, the government will miss an important opportunity to build a more circular economy.

For more information, please contact:

Ruth Chambers, senior parliamentary affairs associate, Greener UK
e: rchambers@green-alliance.org.uk
t: 020 7630 4524

GREENER UK

